

## CHAPTER I

*Foundations*I THE TWO SPHERES OF CHRISTENDOM IN THE  
TENTH–TWELFTH CENTURIES

The period between the tenth and the twelfth centuries was crucial for the establishment of the foundations of Poland and Polish Christianity. These years were also decisive for the final formation of Christendom in Europe, shaping its two major regions – the eastern and the western – in equal measure.

The eastern region had its centre in Constantinople, which had been the capital of the Roman Empire since the fourth century without interruption. Although the official language of Constantinople was Greek, its inhabitants prided themselves on continuing the tradition of the ancient Roman Empire with its idea of universal rule, which they understood to be supreme in the world. Characteristically, Constantinople did not try to emulate ancient Greece and its Hellenic culture, which was after all pagan, but modelled itself on the later empire which had already converted to Christianity.

By the fourth and fifth centuries, the emperor had taken up more or less permanent residence in the newly built Constantinople. In spite of constant wars with barbarian invaders, particularly Arabs, and in spite of great losses and acute domestic conflicts, Byzantium had not lost its vitality. On the contrary, it was entering a new era of stability and further development. It is arguable that the Byzantine Empire dominated the European west in almost every respect – partly on account of the fact that in the ninth and tenth centuries the west was much ravaged by the Arabs, the Normans and later by the migrating Magyars. The Magyars settled in the region which came to be known as Hungary, and from there they spread terror, their horsemen reaching out towards France and Italy. Constantinople was the largest cultural and commercial centre in Europe, and its population stood at one million, a staggering number considering the period. This was as much

as the whole population of Poland in about the year 1000. The largest Roman cities did not exceed several thousand citizens. In the long run, the tireless efforts exerted by zealous Byzantine Christians to convert the Slavs proved decisive. From about the fifth century the Slavs had considerably strengthened their position in the whole of central and eastern Europe, as well as in the Balkans. As a peaceful, agrarian people they migrated as far as Byzantium and Greece proper, fundamentally changing the ethnic structure of the local population in the process.

Seen in a historical perspective, it was the mission undertaken in Moravia in the second half of the ninth century by St Cyril and St Methodius, two outstanding and well-educated Byzantines, that was of the most critical importance for the spreading of Christianity to the Slavs. This mission not only resulted in the conversion of Moravia but it also laid strong and lasting foundations for a native Slavic-Christian culture, providing the Slavs with the basics of alphabet and liturgy. Although at the beginning of the ninth century both the state and, to a large extent, Moravian Christianity came under the pressure of Magyar invasions, an impressive religious and cultural heritage spread to Bulgaria, where it flourished in the tenth century.

The tenth century also witnessed the Christianisation of Kievan Rus. Kievan Rus was the largest of the contemporary Slavonic countries and its conversion was initiated in 988 by the baptism of its ruler, Vladimir the Great, who came to be venerated as a saint. One should remember that the adaptation of Christianity to the vernacular cultures of the Slavs took place before the final breach between Constantinople and Rome in 1054. Despite certain obstacles the mission of St Cyril and St Methodius was by no means an anti-papal undertaking. Indeed, it was carried out with the spiritual support of Rome. Today, it is highly symbolic that John Paul II, the first Slav pope, has recognised St Cyril and St Methodius as patrons of Europe, thus placing them alongside St Benedict, the patriarch of western monasticism. Even so, in the centuries that followed the schism of 1054, the Christian-Slavonic civilisation developed particularly strong links with Constantinople and thus acquired a Byzantine-Slavonic character. This did not, however, prevent other forms of Christianity from evolving. Romanian Christianity, which in the course of time produced its own idiosyncratic liturgical language, and Greco-Catholic Christianity, which was based on the union with Rome and in some ways came close to the formula first proposed by St Cyril and St Methodius, are examples of alternative developments.

The western European region of Christendom centred on Rome. While retaining the splendour of the ancient empire, Rome also enjoyed the prestige of the Holy See, which was ruled by the bishops of the City, the successors of St Peter whom Christ himself had appointed as head of the Church and the Prince of the Apostles. The renewal of the empire began with the coronation of Charlemagne as the first Holy Roman Emperor in the year 800 and culminated in a growing co-operation between Rome and the Franks. In Byzantium this development was received as an offence, verging on heresy. The Byzantines thought Christendom should have only one emperor, who would rule with deep respect for Christian laws and morality. Despite numerous difficulties and disasters, the Empire managed to survive in the West and, in 962, it entered into a union with the German kingdom following the coronation of Otto I of Saxony. In the western sphere Latin continued to be the language of the liturgy and of the educated classes, and it was used in increasingly creative ways, mainly in monasteries. Most monasteries had already adopted the Rule of St Benedict, written in the first half of the sixth century by Benedict, the founding abbot of Monte Cassino. St Benedict created a concise and lucid directory of the monastic life. Because popes and emperors gave their universal support to the Rule, it became a kind of constitution, not only for monks but also for many intellectual and religious elites. By making such a tremendous impact on the work, mentality and customs of the times, St Benedict truly deserves the name of a patron of Europe.

Throughout this period, the monastic community, backed by popes and emperors, was deeply involved in ensuring the conversion of pagan tribes to Christianity. Monks, for instance, went on a mission to England shortly before 600; later on, in the eighth century, the English monks led by St Boniface helped to convert Germany. The tenth century, otherwise an unhappy time for western Europe, brought about many missionary successes. It witnessed the completion of the Christianisation of Bohemia, which had begun in the ninth century, the baptism of a Polish prince and the beginnings of Christianity in Hungary and Scandinavia which had once constituted a great peril for the West. In short, by the year 1000, the map of European Christendom, with its Latin, Greek, Byzantine and Byzantine-Slavonic cultures, was more or less crystallised.

The second half of the tenth century marked the beginning of a process of deep and multifarious transformations in western Europe and this process has continued into the twentieth century. The western

sphere, which in the tenth century was of secondary importance in comparison with its closest Byzantine and Muslim neighbours, was steadily gaining in significance, and finally it achieved an undisputed dominance over these and other areas. By the twelfth century the expansion of the West had already changed the situation noticeably. At the beginning of the following century western knights and burghers seized Constantinople, crushing the military and political might of Byzantium once and for all. From then on the Latin and Greek spheres of Christendom were to develop separately, despite some organic links between them and despite many abortive attempts at unification.

Generally speaking, eastern Christianity emerged from these upheavals with a spirit that came close to the tradition of the first century. The Western Church, on the other hand, underwent deep transformations which decisively influenced its fundamental character. Various reformatory trends were already coming to the surface in the eleventh century. Traditionally, these changes pass under the name of the Gregorian Reform, as it was Pope Gregory VII (1073–85) who first launched them. The reforms aimed at structural and moral change. For instance, the Church sought greater independence from the laity, and from the emperor in particular. It also advocated the revival of evangelical life, which it regarded as being more faithful to the spirit of the first Christians. In fact, by undermining the Carolingian concept of the sacral royal power, the reforms aimed deeper than their instigators had ever conceived. They set the foundations, limited as they were, for the independence and autonomy of Church and state.

The belief that any rule had a sacral character was deeply rooted in many parts of the world and Christianity had reasserted the belief in the fourth and fifth centuries when it accepted the empire as a Christian state. For this reason, the opponents of Gregory VII charged him with heresy with which, they claimed, he intended to flout the existing order decreed by God himself. A ceremonial act, deriving from the Old Testament, of anointing the kings at the coronation and investing the ruler with sacred attributes, had been initiated in the west in Carolingian times. This time-honoured tradition caused many people to believe that the coronation was one of the sacraments. The close links existing between the Church and the laity made it impossible to practise the evangelical precept: 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's' (Matt. 22, 21), and this impasse led to a search for compromises that would satisfy both sides. However, this search for compromise at the same time indicated new

ways of thinking and new solutions. Furthermore, all the attempts to abandon this rigid tradition, ingrained in contemporary society and safeguarded by religious sanctions – to quote Gregory VII, ‘God did not say: “my name is Custom”’ – were of crucial importance for the future of western Christendom, which was about to enter a new phase of stability.

## 2 POLAND

The period from the tenth to the twelfth century not only shaped and strengthened the Polish state but also established its links with western Christendom, which was to flourish on such a grand scale in the subsequent centuries. We do not know much about the actual formation of the Polish state in the tenth century. The Polanie (Polanians), one of the tribes situated between the Baltic Sea, the Carpathians and the Sudety, gradually expanded their territory round the cities of Gniezno and Poznan by annexing neighbouring lands and uniting them under their own House of Piast. Their name, and hence the name of Poland, derives originally from the plains in the region of Wielkopolska (Great Poland). Towards the end of the tenth century the Polanian state was already well established, and, according to the earliest available sources, was ruled by a prince and his court, which included, among other functions, a three-thousand strong *druzyna* or bodyguard. The sources mention that the prince was Mieszko I who married Dobrava, a Czech princess of the Premyslid dynasty from Prague, in the year 965. In the following year, Mieszko I was baptised along with his whole people.

Although vestiges of the Slavonic rites introduced by St Cyril and St Methodius may have taken root in Bohemia or Moravia by the tenth century, by then both countries belonged to the Latin sphere of Christendom; and some of the clergy had formed particularly strong ties with neighbouring Germany. Hence the Latin character of the Christianity that spread to Poland, which in turn assured Poland’s position in the western orbit of Christendom.

By the time of his death in 992, Mieszko I had united five large regions; that is, Wielkopolska, Mazowsze (Mazovia), Malopolska (Little Poland), Slask (Silesia) and Pomorze (Pomerania) between the lower Vistula and the lower Oder. Towards the end of his life he made another move of far-reaching consequences. He asked his kingdom to be placed under the direct protection of the Holy See. This request is contained in an otherwise puzzling document known as *Dagome Iudex*.

However slight its practical significance, symbolically the request made Poland an integral part of the Latin region of Christendom. One of the acute problems facing young countries that had sprung up in the eastern confines of western Christendom – Croatia, Hungary, Bohemia, Poland and Denmark – was their relationship with the Empire. United with the kingdom of Germany since the year 962, the Empire did not abandon its hopes to be dominant over the whole of Latin Roman Christendom. However, the Germans' immediate interests dictated that the Empire focus attention on these smaller neighbours. In the face of the German 'Drang' such countries had no choice but to ask the Holy See for protection. Bohemia could not help becoming a part of the Empire whereas, since Mieszko I, Poland had been determined to defend its independence by appealing to Rome for support. This determination was best reflected in the prolonged wars that three outstanding Polish princes waged with the emperors between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries: Boleslaw Chrobry (Boleslaus the Brave), Boleslaw Smialy (Boleslaus the Bold) and Boleslaw Krzywousty (Boleslaus the Wry-Mouthed). Poland won international recognition when the Emperor Otto III visited Gniezno in the year 1000 and acknowledged that Boleslaw Chrobry ruled an independent country. Another sign of recognition came when Gniezno acquired the status of metropolis of the independent Polish ecclesiastical province, the first among the newly Christianised eastern nations to do so.

The establishment of a strong, autonomous country was facilitated by these events and others that later acquired legendary status: Boleslaw Chrobry's military successes; the peace treaty of Bautzen (1018), which sanctioned Polish independence from the Empire; the capture of Kiev; the nomination of a candidate for the Kievan throne who was acceptable to the Polish king, and his coronation in the winter of 1024–5. However, there is no doubt that these notable triumphs were made possible by tremendous sacrifices demanded from the whole of the population. The price, as it turned out later in the century, was a violent reaction against the Church and the state, traditionally called a pagan revolt. A second blow to the development of Poland was the series of incursions led by the Czech prince Brzetyslaw, which laid waste to the heritage of Christian Poland. According to one of the anonymous early chroniclers, 'wild beasts nested in such evidently sacred places as the cathedral churches of Gniezno and Poznan'. The restoration work was undertaken during the reigns of Kazimierz Odnowiciel (Casimir the Restorer) and his son Boleslaw Smialy; and it took many years to complete.

The first signs of the restoration process can be seen in the times of Smialy, who was crowned in 1076, having first received a papal blessing – like his grandfather Mieszko II Stary (Mieszko II the Old) and great-grandfather Boleslaw Chrobry. Even the murder of St Stanislaw, the bishop of Krakow (a Polish Becket) and the subsequent exile of the otherwise meritorious King Smialy did not disrupt this process. The country was becoming more stable, undergoing slow but deep social changes. At first, the power rested almost entirely in the hands of a ruler and his bodyguard. The whole country was divided into provinces governed by the cities. The lords of the cities, later called castellans because they owned castles, were empowered to rule over their provinces and control their military levies. Their subjects living in fortified towns and cities paid various tributes and rendered services depending on the current need. In the eleventh century this system lost some of its rigidity. It finally collapsed in the thirteenth century, partly on account of the growth of huge landed properties which were worked by serfs or semi-free peasants. Already in the twelfth century most of these properties were administered by the Church, the princes and a few powerful families (identified as being of the baronial caste) who appropriated more and more power and privileges by amassing land. Then came the fragmentation of Poland, following Boleslaw Krzywousty's division of his realm among his sons in 1139. Primarily, the fragmentation was caused by the growing resistance to central authority and by the mounting ambitions of local princes and families. Thus the efforts to uphold the prince's patrimony exerted by rulers such as Mieszko II Stary, Krzywousty's long-lived son who died in 1202, were doomed to failure. His removal from Krakow in 1177 and the choice of Kazimierz Sprawiedliwy (Casimir the Just) as the 'senior prince', made by common consent of the Church and barons of Malopolska, proved that the rule of patrimony was no longer tenable.

### 3 PAGAN BELIEFS

Each of the tribes that constituted Poland and later adopted Christianity was in possession of a rich cultural tradition that reflected its respective historical development. Recent archaeological studies have shown the idiosyncratic character of this development, but have tended to concentrate on its material aspect. It is more difficult to assess the true character of their religious beliefs and rites which, as we now know, played a central part in their lives. Many comparative studies of religious beliefs

held by various Indo-European peoples, the Slavs included, allow us to formulate a slightly different view from the one that has been traditionally accepted. Thus it seems that the religion of the Slavs was complex, based on the worship of a hierarchy of numerous gods and idols, each one performing its own particular function. One can assume that the Slavs developed a common core of religious belief and practice before their fragmentation into the Western, Eastern and Southern Slavs.

Apart from major gods, the Slavs worshipped lesser spirits and fairies associated with particular objects and acts. Among these were the spirits of the dead, the spirits of water, of air, of the forest, and of animals, as well as the domestic or household spirits which were exceptionally important and universal. Multiple cyclic rites related to the calendar or to the natural rhythm of human life – birth, marriage and burial – had an important mythical and religious meaning. Cultic acts, such as prayer or oblation, were primarily performed at home, but there were also a number of sacred sites. All the Slavs worshipped special trees, or, more precisely, the sacred spirits that inhabited them. The oak, the lime tree, the maple tree, the sycamore, the elm and the ash tree were among the most popular. Together with trees, holy groves and stones, the hills that dominated the landscape also served cultic purposes, as exemplified by the *Sleza* range to the south of Wrocław, where many remnants of cultic objects, dating back to the first and second centuries BC, have been found. One of the most magnificent remains of pagan worship is a ridge of loose stones measuring about thirteen hundred metres on the Święty Krzyż Mountain. Although it was built at the end of the ninth century, the Benedictines, who settled there at the beginning of the twelfth century, still faced the problem of hundreds of pilgrims flocking to the sacred spot. According to some chroniclers the Polabians (the Western Slavs) began building their temples there in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but clearly they were already influenced by Christianity. As a result of the great migrations that took place at the waning of antiquity and the turbulent origins of the nascent Slav states, the pantheon of major pagan deities and the form of public rites underwent considerable alteration.

The names and some effigies of particular Slav gods, such as Perun (the God of Thunder), Swietowit (the God of War and Harvest), Swarog (the Sunmaker), or Trzygłow (the Three-headed One), date back to the last centuries of Slav paganism. The evidence suggests that individual tribes and tribal communities tended to single out a major deity for special reverence and to adopt a single idiosyncratic form of public



worship, which was to be followed by everyone. On the other hand, the world of spirits, customs and domestic traditions was more homogeneous, being deeply rooted in small family or territorial communities. The cult of Mother Earth, for instance, spread widely among predominantly rural Slav societies, especially in the East, and in one form or another persisted until the present century. The extremely elaborate and active cult of ancestor worship carried a special significance as the expression of solidarity between the living and the dead. Among other features, the cult's activities consisted of oblations, prayers and funeral banquets, held either immediately after someone's death or to mark its anniversary. For several centuries the Slavs made burnt offerings to the dead, a practice that ceased only after the arrival of Christianity. Solidarity with the dead strengthened solidarity among their living relatives even if the latter no longer remained in their patrimonies. The close-knit complexity of traditional family relationships can be best illustrated by the numerous terms of address referring to individual members of the family that still survive in the modern Polish language. This family solidarity on all social levels can be traced back to the oldest documents and sources of Polish history, such as a precious volume from a Cistercian monastery in Henrykow in Silesia, the Book of Henrykow.

It is conceivable that in the course of time the tradition of family bonding was transferred to large territorial communities and that it came to determine not only their codes of consciousness but also their rules of conduct. As such it often clashed with the ideals of Christianity, as in the case of St Wojciech (St Adalbert) who was bishop of Prague in the tenth century. Whereas the all-powerful family of a pagan adulteress wanted to follow their time-honoured tradition by punishing the woman with death, St Wojciech was intent on showing her mercy. This and many other such stories demonstrate how, for the majority of Slav tribes and communities, the adoption of Christianity was primarily a political act that changed the form of their public worship rather than their domestic or communal customs and attitudes. It was for this reason that Christianity was originally forced to compromise and develop a symbiotic relationship with the lingering pagan mentality and culture of the Slavs. The unique character of Slav Christianity derives from this relationship, vestiges of which can still be seen today.

4 THE BAPTISM OF POLAND. THE POLISH CHURCH UNDER  
 MIESZKO I AND BOLESŁAW CHROBRY

Although it is highly likely that Christianity reached Polanian tribes long before the year 966, we still lack any convincing evidence of its enduring presence on the territories which later made up the Piast kingdom prior to that date. Thus the decision taken by Mieszko I and his counsellors to turn Poland into a Christian country seems to have been exceptionally daring. Mieszko's marriage to Dobrava, the Czech king's daughter, placed Poland within the sphere of influence of the Latin Church and facilitated its Christianisation. At that time Bohemia, a Slav country closely related in language to Poland, had long been Christian, though not entirely free of pagan traditions. Dobrava's uncle, Prince Vaclav, who was assassinated in 935, and her great-grandmother Ludmila, were zealous Christians, and by 966 they were already being venerated as saints. Dobrava's two known siblings took vows: Strahkvas-Christian entered the monastery of St Emmeram in Ratisbon (Regensburg), whereas her sister Mlada-Maria spent the years 965–967 in Rome and later became prioress of the convent of St George, which she established in Prague.

According to Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg (d. 1018), a fairly well-informed witness of the times, Dobrava was most instrumental in making Mieszko adopt Christianity. Apart from its religious significance, there were also important political reasons for such a step related to the internal and external situation of Poland. Small pagan countries of the Polabian Slavs were coming one after another under the pressure of Christian Germany; in 963 Margrave Gero captured Luzyce (Lusatia) and reached the middle Oder. In the east, Kiev was fully occupied with the subjugation of Ruthenian tribes whose territories were adjacent to those of Poland, and at the same time sought closer contacts with Germany and its emperors. Hence the invitation sent by the Kievan Princess Olga to Adalbert, a German bishop who represented Emperor Otto himself, in 961. In the south, Christian Bohemia captured Malopolska, and possibly Silesia at some time in the middle of the tenth century, and became Mieszko's close neighbour. Despite a temporary truce, rivalry between the two countries was inevitable and manifested itself at the close of Mieszko's reign, after Dobrava's death. In the light of these circumstances, the adoption of Christianity was a necessity that strengthened Poland's international position.